

# Deconstructing the Conceptualization of Generational Cohorts

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## ABSTRACT

The present time has witnessed a diverse and multi-generational workforce which more often than not proves to be a source of stress and conflict for many individuals, ultimately resulting in counter-productive behaviors at work. This problem became the thrusting force to understand diverse, multi-generational surroundings for better communication, collaboration and coordination. However, the first challenge in doing so is to define and classify generational cohorts, which requires examination of factors that are temporal, historical, developmental, cultural, technological and political. Thus, the present study is an examination of different criteria for definition and classification of a generational cohort by different researchers, through studies done in different regions over time, to be able to come up with a more comprehensive set of conditions to look at while engaging with the subject of generational studies. To meet this objective Systematic-Review of thirty research papers from reputed journals was done. Sixteen different categorizations of generational cohorts across samples from America, Europe and Asian nations were found which were further examined for the basis of their classification. Separate analysis was also done for each cohort for the total sample and the findings are discussed to understand the points of agreement and disagreement among different researchers on the basis of the classification.

**KEYWORDS:** *Generational Cohorts, Categorization, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y*

## INTRODUCTION

Generations are an inevitable part of each individual's life, similar to that of an organization. Being a multi-generational workforce puts a considerable amount of pressure on us to understand what are generations and thus, the concept of generations and their effects have long been discussed by researchers in anthropology, sociology, and social psychology (Hung, Gu, & Yim, 2007). It is important to understand and study different generations in terms of their attitudes, values, belief systems, world view, ethics etc. (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008) as these produce a difference in behavior and expectations. Failure to recognize these differences can lead to negative organizational outcomes including intergenerational conflict, misunderstanding and miscommunication, poor working relationships, reduced employee productivity, poor well-being, lower innovation, and fewer organizational citizenship behaviors (Adams, 2000; Bradford, 1993; Dittman, 2005; Fyock, 1990; Jurkiewicz, 2000; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Westerman & Yamamura, 2007; Yu & Miller, 2003).

The *Problem of Generations* by Mannheim, which was published in 1920, is a seminal study in the field which marked the starting point in the study of generations. A generation can be defined as a group of people of similar age in a similar location who experienced similar social, historical, and life events (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Mannheim, 1972) and a Cohort refers to a group of individuals born at the same time who are *presumed* to be similar as a result of shared experiences. Only chronological proximity to events

and other drivers of difference are assumed to distinguish them from other cohorts (Parry and Urwin, 2011). McMullin, Comeau and Jovic (2007) suggests that a generational cohort builds solidarity through shared cultural symbols such as music or fashion. Foster (2013) suggests that an understanding of generations as identifiable social groups now dominates, with the term applied to birth cohorts (Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008; Meriac, Woehr, & Banister, 2010). As these cohorts are based on membership in an age group that shares collective memories during formative years of life (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010), the shared experiences serve as the basis of categorization of generations (e.g., industrialization, fundamental changes, cataclysmic events, and tragedies) and differentiate one generation from another (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998) because they have a profound effect on the attitudes, values, beliefs, and expectations of generational groups (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, 1977, 1990; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). The effects of such key life experiences tend to be relatively stable over the course of an individual's life (Smola and Sutton, 2002). In accordance with this, The Generational Theory (Strauss and Howe, 1991) suggests that events in history help catalyse people into generations that occur every 40 to 45 years. The categorization of Generational cohorts also differs in many ways, of which geographical location and culture (Srinivasan, 2013), are the most popular. This is understandable as different cultures and geographies do not bear witness to the same crucial political, technological and historical events and more so not at the same time. For example, India witnessed

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industrialization much later than European and American nations. Thus, it makes little sense to categorize generations based on their experience of industrialization across the globe and thus, it is of great importance to conduct cross-cultural research to account that each nation has a different culture, tradition, social and industrial conditions prevalent at a given point of time. Thus, one should not make the grave mistake of considering clusters of countries as together and parallel during the research process and borrowing one country's categorization of cohorts for another. While generational differences exist across the world, the definition of 'Generation' remain specific to a given society at a particular point of time (Hole, Zhong and Schwartz, 2010). Hence, arises the need for culture specific classifications of generations.

In the field of academia, there also exist a group of researchers who consider birth year to be a reliable measure of Generational cohort. However, many researchers also agree to the fact that birth year cannot be an absolute criterion for individuals to have the same values based on a particular categorization (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Empirical evidence in support of this hypothesis suggests that there exist differences in values within a single generation resulting from other factors including gender (Wallace, 2006) and academic achievement (Ng, Schweitzer and Lyons, 2010). Giancola (2006) reported that perceived generational differences are a product of popular culture versus social science. Other researchers have found that observed generational differences may be explained, at least in part, by age, life stage, or career stage effects instead of generation (Arnett, 2010; Carlson & Gjerde, 2009; Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Kohut, 1971; Parry & Urwin, 2011). Thus, the categorization of generational cohorts is a complex and varied proposition.

Furthermore, there is contradictory and inconclusive evidence on whether generational differences exist at all (Arnett, 2010; Roberts, Edmonds, & Grijalva, 2010; Terracciano, 2010). In view of the above it is important to conduct generational studies and test generational differences as real, because they may have practical and theoretical implications (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). It has also been repeatedly emphasized in the existing literature that effectively handling generational difference in the workforce is one of the biggest challenges faced by managers today (Lester, Standifer, Schultz & Windsor, 2000) and thus the present research is an examination of different criteria for definition and classification of a generation cohort, to be able to come up with a more comprehensive set of conditions to look at while engaging with the subject of defining generational cohorts and conduct generational studies. Such an inquiry would prove to be an asset to researchers trying to understand generations and conduct empirical work in the area of Generational studies.

## Method

### Aim:

To identify various categorizations of Generational cohorts in literature and systematically review them for points of agreement and disagreements among researchers on their basis of categorization, within and between cultures, geographical locations and time.

## Design

The present study used a step-wise approach to understand the categorization of Generational cohorts available in the literature. Firstly, research articles were retrieved from various reputed sources including Taylor & Francis online, Wiley online Journals, Oxford journals, Springer, PsycNet, Jstor, Research Gate, Routledge, Sage journals etc. Only the journals with an Impact factor of "1 & above" were chosen for the present study. The keywords used to search for relevant research articles included 'Generations', 'Generational cohort', 'Differences in Generational cohorts' and 'Categorization of generational cohorts'. These keywords were used because the aim was to search for papers/articles which talked about generational cohorts and how they have been categorized. This process yielded forty research articles. To determine the relevance of the article for the present study, each article was carefully read. The articles which addressed the differences and similarities amongst generational cohorts and presented a method of categorization of Generational cohorts were selected for the next step, whereas, papers which outlined the characteristics of generations and values associated with them were removed from further analysis. This process yielded 30 research articles of relevance from which different categorizations were taken for further analysis. The retrieved categorizations of Generational cohorts were then subjected to 'Systematic Review' to gather information on the basis of their categorization. Systematic-Review is a critical qualitative approach wherein information is combined to find answers of well-defined questions. It is a review of a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect and analyze data from the studies that are included in the review (Collab, 2003). Systematic reviews are characterized by being methodical, comprehensive, transparent, and replicable (Siddaway, Wood and Hedges, 2019). It is the means of putting together pieces of gathered information to create an understanding of the whole (Centre for Reflection, Education and Action, 2005). Systematic-Review is different from Meta-Analysis, which is a statistical approach to combine data from numerous sources and then apply statistical methods to derive a final conclusion from this set of combined data. Finally, the categorizations were also analysed to understand the points of agreements and disagreement among researchers on how categorizations differ within and between cultures, geography and time frames. Thus, the data was analyzed at two levels, based on 1. geographical location and culture, and 2. time. It is important to note that academicians and researchers who borrowed the categorization of a particular researcher for their own research endeavor were not included in the analysis.

## Research Findings

The research findings are discussed under the following two headings: 1. Analysis and findings based on 'Geographical Location' and 2. Analysis and findings based on 'Time'. The first level of analysis i.e., Geographical Location, attempts to investigate the basis of categorization and the points of agreement and disagreement amongst researchers for different geographic locations and cultures they represent. In the second level of analysis i.e., Time, each categorization has been compared cross-culturally to draw conclusions on each generational cohort as a whole.

**A. Data Analysis based on Geographical Location and Culture****I. Generational Cohorts in American, European and Taiwanese samples**

Different researchers have reported categorizations of Generational Cohorts by taking American, European and Taiwanese samples for their study (Refer to Table 1). The categorizations of Generational cohorts in most of these studies have been based on the most commonly used terms by previous researchers in the field. However, unique terms have also been used by some researchers. For example, Dries (2008) coined the term “Conservatives” for the cohort born between 1925-1945, which is commonly also known as Veterans or Traditionalists. Similarly, the term “Me Gen” was used for the term Baby Boomers by one researcher. It is to be noted that only the original contributions of researchers in categorizing generational cohorts were included in the sample. Academicians and researchers who borrowed categorization of a particular researcher for their own research endeavour were not included in the present study.

Thus, it can be inferred that researchers working with American, European and Taiwanese samples have repeatedly, over time used the Birth year as the basis of categorization of Generational cohorts. Secondly, majority of the researchers have followed and agreed upon the terms assigned by the earliest researchers in the field for naming each cohort which include terms like Veterans, Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y. Only a few handful of researchers have provided alternate names to these cohorts based upon either the characteristic of the generation or the perception of the generation in public eye. It is also important to note that the group of researchers who worked with the same sample population, did not report similar range of birth years for each cohort.

**Table 1: Generational Cohorts by different researchers in American, European and Taiwanese samples**

Researchers	Name of the Generational cohort				Sample
	Veterans/ Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Gen X/ Lost generation	Gen Y/ Millenials/ Nexters	
<i>Strauss &amp; Howe (1991)</i>	1925-1942	1943-1960	1961-1980	1982-*	American & European
<i>Dries (2008)</i>	1925-1945 (Conservatives)	1946-1964 (Me Gen)	1965-1980	1981-2001	
<i>Sullivan (2009)</i>	1922-1945 (Greatest)	1946-1964	1965-1983	1984-2002	
<i>Smola &amp; Sutton (2002)</i>	-*	1943-1960	1961-1980	1981-2000	
<i>Zemke (1999,2000)</i>	1922-1943	1943-1960	1960-1980	1980-2000	
<i>Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman &amp; Lance (2010)</i>	1925-1945 (Silent gen)	1946-1964	1965-1981	1982-1999 (nGen, iGen)	
<i>Raines (2002)</i>	1900-1945	1946-1964	1965-1980	1981-1999	
<i>Jurkiewicz (2000)</i>	-*	1946-1964	1963-1981	-*	
<i>Martin &amp; Tulgan (2002)</i>	1925-1945	1946-1964	1965-1977	1978-1989	
<i>Wood (2005)</i>	1923-1942	1943-1964	1965-1981	1982-2003	Taiwanese
<i>Lin &amp; Huang (2008)</i>	Before 1949	1950-1965	1966-1981	After 1982	

\*Not reported by the researcher/s.

**II. Generational Cohorts in Indian samples**

For Indian samples, various researchers have reported categorizations of Generational Cohorts in their study (Refer to Table 2). Most of these categorizations have been based on birth years, just like American, European and Taiwanese samples. For example, Roongrerngsuke (2010) and Erickson (2009) reported exactly same birth years for each Cohort in their two independent studies done in different years with Indian samples which are in line with the categorization offered by Raines (2002) for American samples. However, one researcher out of the three who used birth years as the basis of categorization in Indian sample, termed the cohorts in a unique manner based on the characteristics of the generation. For example, Ghosh and Chaudhari (2009) used the terms ‘Conservatives’, ‘Integrators’ and ‘Y2K’ for the cohorts most popularly known as Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y respectively. Furthermore, one researcher, Srinivasan (2012), reported cohorts based on ‘Employee Generations’ rather than birth years unlike most other researchers. Employee generation refers to the time when an employee joined the formal workforce and started contributing to the economy. It is to be noted that, academicians and researchers who borrowed the categorization of a particular researcher for their own research endeavour were not included in the present study.

Thus, it can be inferred that for Indian samples, the basis of categorization of Generational cohorts has been majorly based on birth year. Further, while most of these researchers have tried to make cohort categorization culture-driven, they have mostly adopted the terminologies of western models in naming these cohorts, except one researcher who despite using birth year as



the basis of categorization, termed the cohorts in a unique manner based on the characteristics of that generation. Most of these researchers have somewhat agreed upon the range of birth years for each cohort unlike the western models who have a greater variability in the birth year range of each cohort. Other than the birth year, 'the year of joining the formal workforce' is also a criterion that has been used in Indian samples unlike western samples.

**Table 2: Generational Cohorts by different researchers in Indian samples**

Researchers	Name of the Generational cohort			
	Veterans/ Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Gen X / Lost generation	Gen Y/ Millenials/ Nexters
Roongrerngsuke (2010)	1928-1945	1946-1964	1965-1980	1981-1995
Erickson (2009)	1928-1945	1946-1964	1965-1980	1981-1995
Ghosh & Chaudhari (2009)	-*	1947-1969 (Conservatives)	1970-1984 (Integrators)	1985-1995 (Y2K)
Srinivasan (2012) (Employee Generations)	Pre liberalization (started working before 1991)	Early liberalization (1991-2001)	Rapid growth (2002-2006)	Plateaued growth (2007-2012)

\*Not reported by the researcher/s.

### III. Generational Cohorts in other Asian samples

For Japanese, Chinese and South Korean samples, various researchers have reported categorizations of Generational Cohorts in their study (Refer to Table 3) and just like other nations Japanese, Chinese and South Korean samples too have Birth years, as their basis of categorization. However, it is interesting to note that the cohorts reported for Asian samples are termed very differently than what others researchers have used (for e.g., Baby Boomers, Gen X etc.). The terms used to represent Generational Cohorts in the Asian samples have been more culture specific for each country, highlighting the importance of culture and geography in the region. Also, there seems to be greater variation in the number of generational cohorts between Asian samples depending upon the nation. For example, in Japan, in the time period between 1946-2002 there are seven different cohorts, whereas, in China and South Korea, there exist only five and three cohorts respectively for the same period.

Thus, it can be inferred that for other Asian samples, the basis of categorization of generational cohorts is Birth years. However, researchers in these samples have come up with unique, culture-specific terms for each generational cohort in accordance with the nation they studied, reflecting a more culture-sensitive approach to generation categorizations. It has also been observed that rather than adhering to the informally agreed upon criterion of making just four generational cohorts as done by western researchers, the researchers in these samples have made multiple cohorts for each country in complying with the social, political and technological changes of that country.

**Table 3: Generational Cohorts in Japanese, Chinese and South Korean samples**

Researcher	Names of Generational Cohort							Sample
Hole, Zhong and Schwartz (2010)	1st Baby boomer (1946- 1950)	Danso gen (1951- 1960)	Bubble gen (1961- 1970)	2 <sup>nd</sup> Baby boomer (1971- 1975)	Post bubble (1976- 1986)	Gen Z (1987- 1995)	Yutori (1996- 2002)	Japanese
	Post 50s (1950- 1959)	Post 60s (1960- 1969)	Post 70s (1970- 1979)	Post 80s (1980- 1989)	-*	Post 90s (1990-1999)	-*	Chinese
	475 gen (1950- 1959)	-*	-*	386 gen (1960- 1969)	-*	Gen X & Gen Y (1970 onwards)	-*	South Korean

\*Not reported by the researcher/s.

### B. Systematic Review of each Generational Cohort over time

The Systematic review of generational cohorts for total samples (American, European, Taiwanese and Indian) was done for the three categories, popularly known as Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y.

The terms used to name these particular cohorts have an interesting background in itself. For example, Baby Boomers are called so because 1946 (which is the starting year of this cohort's birth range in majority of cases) saw a boom in the birth rates in the western countries (Parry and Urwin, 2011). The origin of the label 'Gen X' can be traced back to Jane Deverson and Charles Hamblett's book titled 'Generation X', published in 1965, which was originally a commissioned work for Woman's Own Magazine (BBC news, 2014; Pritchard and Whiting, 2011). The term 'X' was used as representative of partly unknown, because the teenagers were a mystery (Deverson, 1965). It is argued that the term Gen Y was used for the next cohort to continue the natural alphabetical order. However, individuals belonging to Gen Y are more commonly termed as the 'Millenials', because the oldest millennials were graduating high school in the year 2000 which marks the beginning of the new millennium (Howe and Strauss, 1991).

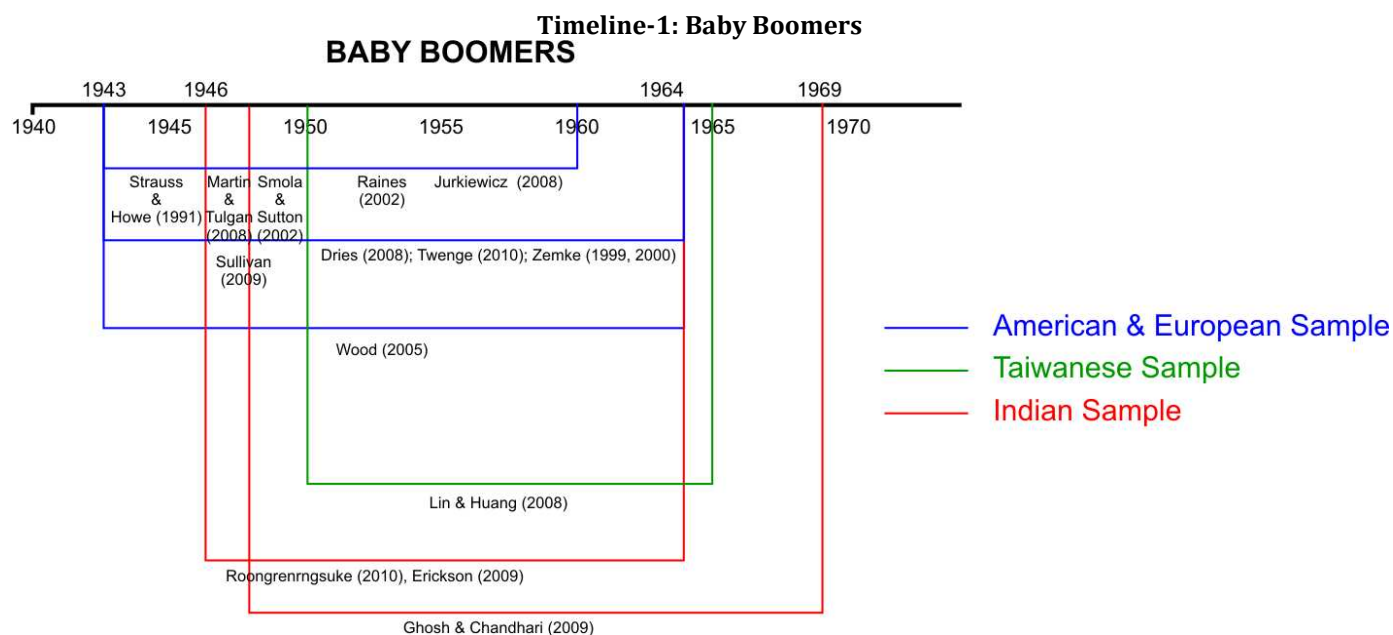
For the Systematic review of generational cohorts for total samples, each cohort across the total samples (American, European, Taiwanese, and Indian) was analysed on 'timeline'. The cohorts from the studies on other Asian samples such as Japanese,

Chinese and South Korean, were not included in the analysis due to their uniqueness and vast distinctiveness in range of birth years for each cohort and the number of cohorts in a given time frame from other categorizations, which mostly followed a three generational cohort rule in a time span of sixty-two years. It would have been unscientific to compare them with other categorizations without a cultural understanding of these nations, which forms the cornerstone of the present systematic analysis.

For better understanding and clarity of the three chosen cohorts - Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y, each cohort is depicted on a timeline to look for points of agreements and disagreements among researchers in deciding each cohort.

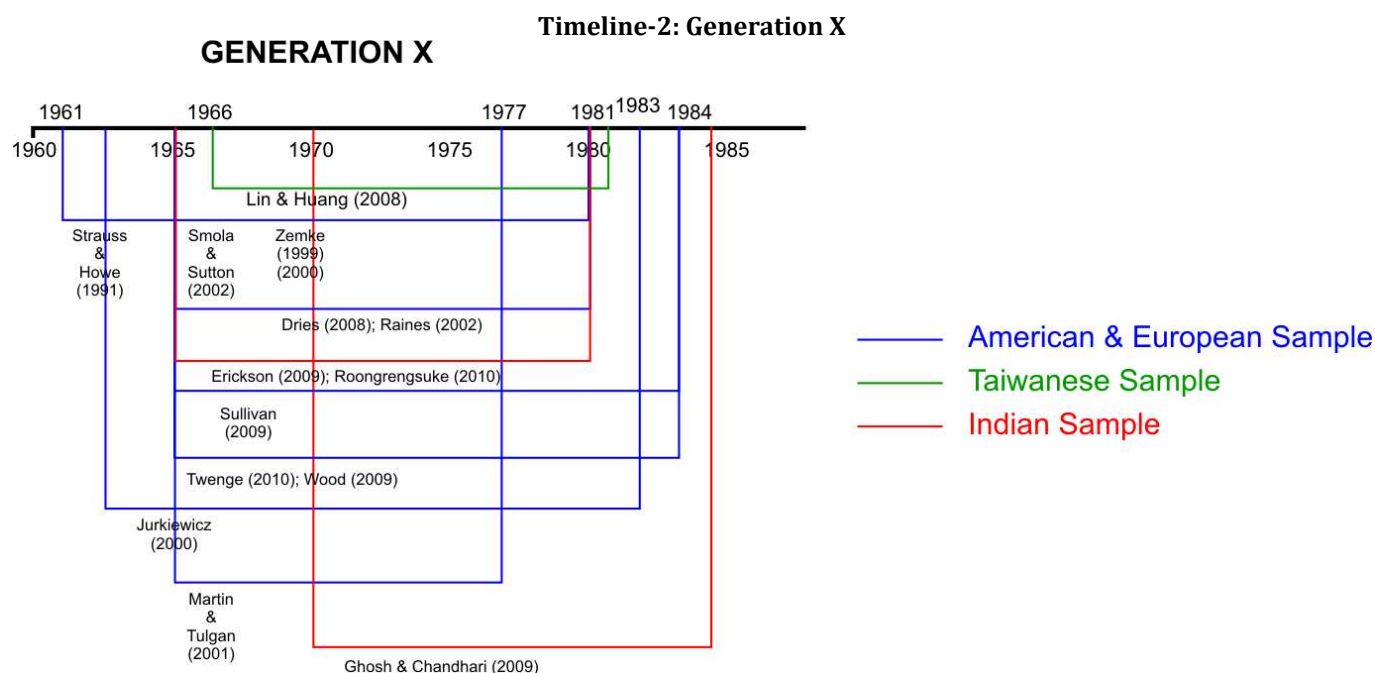
## I. Baby Boomers

For the cohort 'Baby Boomers', all researchers agreed upon 1943-1964 birth years range in American and European samples, whereas, for Indian population, researchers suggested the birth years from 1946-1969 (Refer to Timeline-1). And for Taiwanese sample, this range of birth years further shifted to 1950-1965. Thus, there exist a variety of opinions among researchers for categorization of baby boomers cross culturally, however they seem to reach a consensus when working with similar samples, i.e. within the same cultural context/national boundaries.



## II. Generation X

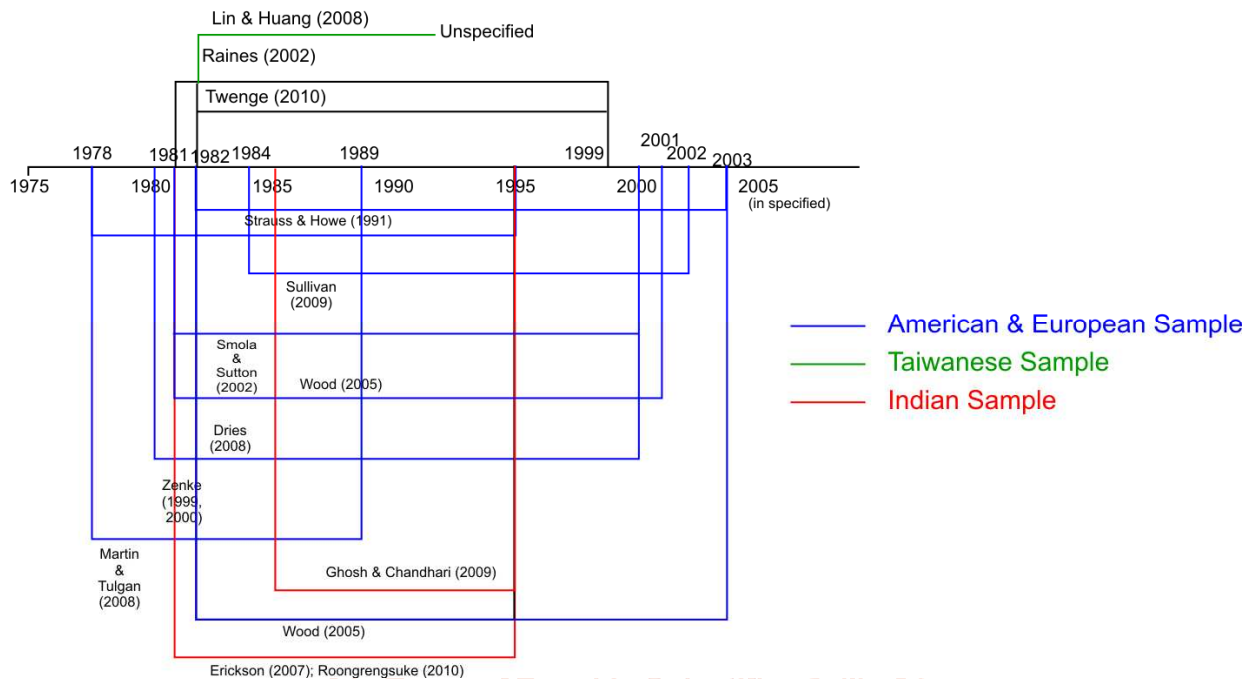
For Generation X, there seems to be large variability in the birth year range (Refer to Timeline-2) unlike that of Baby Boomers. Researchers, who worked within the same population in Gen X, differ greatly on their understanding of this cohort and thus its categorization. During cross-cultural comparisons also, it is evident that researchers differed greatly on their categorizations. For example, the birth year range for Gen X in American and European sample ranged from 1961-1984, whereas in Indian samples, it is from 1965-1985.



### III. Generation Y

Generation Y is the last cohort to be categorized. But researchers appear to differ greatly on the birth years range for this cohort also (Refer to Timeline-3), similar to Generation X. There seems to be greater points of disagreements than agreements amongst researchers when they talk about this generation within similar samples. For example, With American and European samples, the birth year range varied from 1978-2003, which is a total of 25 years. However, with Indian sample, this variation is less, ranging from 1981-1995. This is representative of the fact that Generation Y is the cohort with the most varied birth year range and thus, an inconclusive categorization, both within a culture and across cultures/ nationally and globally.

**Timeline-3: Generation Y**



### Discussion

The Systematic review of various models of Generational cohorts provided by researchers by working with a varied range of sample populations across time, geography and cultures yielded some crucial insights in generational studies. Firstly, since the inception of generational studies, categorizations based on the year of birth, has been used as the sole criteria to categorize generational cohorts. This idea in itself has been continuously used in an unquestionable and given manner by researchers throughout the globe. It is hence argued that researchers should now move on to identifying other ways of categorizing generations to cater to other fields of studies and come up with a more concrete way to define generations. This idea has been reported just once in the form of Employee generations. It is argued that such models can prove more beneficial for studying generational differences at workplace as the socio-political, economic and technological environments during the time of entry and working in the national workforce would be a better predictor of attitudes and desires of employees rather than their childhood experiences and collective memories. For example, a generation might have witnessed flourishing economy during their childhood years but during the working years, the individuals had to go through recession in the worldwide economy. It only makes sense that this generation would aspire to boost the economy and spend their money more cautiously because of the recession they faced rather than spending open-handedly, a trait which they might have picked up based on childhood experiences.

The findings also suggest that there is a lack of agreement among researchers on the range of birth years for each

cohort among same samples and cross-culturally. It is argued that this shifting in birth year range is a result of shift in occurrence of industrialization and technological advancements in respective nations. As similar technology, wars, economic conditions did not prevail throughout the world at the same point of time in history, there is a difference in the temporality of the impact these conditions created in the lives of people, thus influencing their world-views and values at varied points of time. This flux in the temporal stability of a generational cohort across the globe suggests that there is scope for finding alternative means and measures to better define, classify and categorize generations.

In spite of all the loopholes, each categorization has its own merit, and one categorization, given by Smola & Sutton (2002) is found to be representative of all other categorizations offered for American and European samples. It suggests that there exist three generational cohorts - Baby Boomers (1943-1960), Generation X (1961-1980) and Generation Y (1981-2000). This is also the second most widely used categorization in the field of academia after the categorization offered by Strauss and Howe (1991) (Parry and Urwin, 2011) and hence, researchers have a consensus over the same.

### Conclusion

Categorization of Generational cohorts on the basis of birth year has been the only way to define cohorts in generational studies for a very long period of time. This has not only led to confusion among researchers on how to categorize cohorts

but has been a stepping stone to interdisciplinary research work. Categorizations such as 'Employee generations' can be considered a starting point for such interdisciplinary works. As multi-generational, multi-cultural workforce grows, it will be inevitable to study the patterns of similarities and differences of such cohorts to select, recruit, understand and better manage their environment and interactions. Thus, the need of the hour is to develop alternative methods to categorize generations and reach a consensus on a unified way to classify and define generations worldwide for doing applied work and practical implications. As of now, it is evident that researchers have not found one single way to categorize cohorts and there seems to be no consensus on what are the important historical, political and social events that categorize a particular cohort, which has led to a variable range of birth years for each cohort within a country and cross-culturally. It is of importance to carefully consider the contributions of culture and history of a place in shaping the members of its society as shown impeccably by various researchers by working with different samples, but our goal as researchers is to reach a concrete method of conceptualization and operationalization of independent variables for further analysis. In simpler words, our aim should be to take up all the contributions made in defining cohorts and triangulate this information to draw similarities on the basis of which a single criterion for categorization can be achieved.

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